

A Better, Stronger America: Together

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I am delighted to have the opportunity to contribute to this collaboration between the Knight Foundation and the Kettering Foundation. The affinity between the two goes back to the early 1990s when Kettering and Knight joined forces in public journalism. The collaboration has continued, thanks to the leadership of Knight president and CEO Alberto Ibargüen. This book is one of the results of this alliance.

Crisis upon Crisis

When I was asked to write this piece, the country was flooded by a tsunami of crises. The first of these was the spread of coronavirus pandemic, which was quickly followed by a faltering economy. Then the death of George Floyd and others reignited the struggle for racial justice.

These events were occurring when the political system had already been weakened by the steady erosion of people's confidence in our major authoritative institutions, including governments, higher education, the media, and philanthropy. (Although in 2020 a few of these institutions did a bit better in the polls, the composite of all of them remained significantly below 50 percent.) Even more troubling, many Americans have come to doubt that "people like us" can make a meaningful difference in what happens in our country. All of this has taken place as the United States has been suffering from partisan polarization and societal divisiveness. Deeper still, the democratic foundations of our way of life are in jeopardy. A crisis in democracy itself makes it more difficult to deal with the effects of persistent, wicked, or structural problems affecting society.

Some Americans want fundamental change while others hope, just as fervently, for a return to "normal," meaning a return to a time when they believe the country was strong and guided by tried-and-true values. Now, respect for those with an opposing point of view appears hard to come by. Just trying to understand what is happening can be contested. I don't want to be too gloomy; perhaps there are people who don't fall squarely into any camp or those who want to see change on some issues while preserving other things. Maybe there is more common ground than is being recognized. These matters are outside the scope of this piece, but there is another side to the story.

The good news is people do agree that there is too much divisiveness.² And a sense of civic duty isn't dead. Many Americans believe they *should* make a difference, and they want to, although they aren't always sure how. Local civic life has been strong, as seen in the outpouring of people helping people. Americans have reached out across dividing lines to join forces when disasters strike. Our history is a testament to the country's resilience, which was evident in its renewal after the Civil War, the Great Depression, and the threat of domination by foreign powers.

Getting beyond the Turmoil

We can hope that the present turmoil will end with useful lessons learned and lasting, constructive results. That doesn't always happen, and when it does, it's certainly never easy. I suggest that there are ways to begin to move forward, though not without difficulty, by drawing on several sources, including insights coming from the Kettering Foundation, which isn't a grantmaking organization but rather a research institution. Kettering studies the role of the public in a democracy. In doing that, we have benefited from the experiences of trustees like the late George Gallup and Daniel Yankelovich, who were public opinion experts. Today, we also benefit from a nationwide and international network of civic, educational, and other institutions that exchange research with the foundation. Many of these institutions work directly with citizens from all walks of life.

Obstacles

In meeting the challenge of getting lasting, constructive results, we first have to recognize formidable obstacles. One, which I have already noted, is that authoritative institutions, both governmental and nongovernmental, have been suffering a major loss of public confidence. This lack of confidence extends to the professionals who staff these institutions as well. And it's no passing wave of dissatisfaction, either. It has been building for decades.

Many institutions have tried to demonstrate accountability and stem this disaffection with well-intentioned efforts to reach the citizenry through public participation programs. These efforts don't appear to have been effective. Even as these efforts have grown, confidence has continued to drop. Institutions often defend themselves with facts, but that defense isn't working. Maybe people don't just want more information. Maybe they want a different relationship with the institutions, one based more on shared concerns than on facts alone.

Some scholars believe that the methods being used to consult with the public have actually made the relationship with the public worse and accelerated the loss of confidence. In certain cases, these efforts have cynically been labeled as "nonsultation" because it appears that the important decisions have already been made.

Furthermore, some institutional officials mirror the public's lack of trust with their own lack of confidence in the public. Some variation of the rhetorical question, "Many of the people are quite stupid, aren't they?" is likely asked at many dinner parties in Washington.³ The distrust is mutual. However, lasting improvements to this relationship may require more than actions that institutions alone can take. Trust has to be rebuilt by both parties.

Another serious obstacle, which I mentioned above, is that so many people doubt they have the power to make a meaningful difference in our political system. Money is power, and for many Americans, that's in short supply. Influence is power, and major institutions seem unaware or deaf to what ordinary folks have to offer. Yet institutions appear to hear special interest lobbyists quite clearly. Sometimes it seems that the powers-that-be want a democracy—but one without citizens.

Still, lasting improvements aren't likely without broad public engagement. As Abraham Lincoln wisely observed, "With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed."⁴ That precept still holds in the modern era. Dean Rusk, secretary of state during the John F. Kennedy and Lydon B. Johnson administrations, said, "At the end of the day, the American people are going to have to decide. No president can pursue a policy for very long without the support and the understanding of the Congress and the American people."⁵

A third obstacle has to do with public judgment—or the lack thereof. Good judgment develops only when public issues are framed so that the decisions will be made in a way that encourages people to move from their first impressions and impulsive reactions to more shared and reflective judgments. Unfortunately, controversial issues are often framed and discussed in ways that make this movement (and lasting improvements) impossible.

My friend and colleague Harry Boyte, who was on the front lines of the American civil rights movement and was later involved in South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle, is quite aware of how much depends on the way issues are framed. He has issued a strong warning recently against what he calls the accusatory approach to problem solving. Those being blamed may or may not be blameworthy, but they are likely to respond to accusations in a hostile manner, which dooms any possibility of working together for constructive results.

Meeting the Test of Time

Even constructive measures don't last forever. Circumstances change, new problems emerge, what were once solutions no longer work, and some reform efforts prove ineffective. For example, consider the number of efforts to reform policing that failed to have any significant results.⁶

First Steps: Reframing Issues for Deliberative Decision Making

Reforms that last long enough to make a difference endure for more reasons than can be covered in a piece like this. However, there are opportunities today to make improvements even in this time of cascading crises. As noted above, they have to do with the way issues are framed. All

the crises we face present numerous issues that require collective decisions and action. At this writing, schools were due to open for in-person classes in fall 2020. The issue was how this could be done safely, but in a way that was educationally sound and took into account the psychological well-being of children, as well. Adding to the complexity and tensions, this was also an issue of who gets to make these decisions: Educators? Health officials? Local school boards? Government officials? Parents? There are experts with useful knowledge, but there are no experts on what is the right answer. That requires exercising our best judgment. When this decision making is done deliberatively, it can accelerate the movement from hasty reactions to good judgment.

As Harry Boyte recognized, how issues like these are framed is crucial. Decisions have to be made, and there are usually several plausible options to consider. However, they will all have costs and consequences that might be difficult to accept. If the attempts at this decision making degenerate into groups blaming one another in a power struggle, it will reduce the chances that a sound decision will emerge and that all the parties will work together. That doesn't have to happen.

What Could Help?

What happens in these situations depends on whether there is a fair and careful weighing of the pros and cons of all the options, particularly the less popular ones. That is my definition of deliberation, which is the exercise of our faculty for judgment in collective decision making for collective action. Human beings have an inherent faculty for judgment. That ability doesn't have to get "up to scale." We all have it, even though, like other abilities, we may not use it when we should. People deliberate privately on personal issues like marriage and careers. But deliberating publicly with others, often with strangers, is more difficult. That recognized, you can hear elements of this deliberation in the everyday speech going on at many dinner tables. Of course, everyday conversations are often intermittent and inconclusive. Movement from first reactions to more informed judgments proceeds slowly. But it can be accelerated.

The movement picks up speed when people consider what is most dear to them, which goes deeper than interests or even "values" and beliefs do. These are the things that humans have long considered essential for their survival. These include such primal imperatives as being safe from danger, having the freedom to do what is considered most essential for well-being, and being treated fairly. Most basic of all, human beings have wanted enough control to give themselves a reasonable chance to get what they hold dear.

Everyone, except maybe daredevils, is influenced by these survival imperatives; still, in given circumstances, they can be in tension with one another. For instance, what makes us safe from danger can interfere with our freedom. Working through these tensions requires exercising our faculty for judgment. Fortunately, there are now efforts to help people recognize and use this faculty whenever decisions are being made. There are civic, educational, and other nonpartisan

organizations like those sponsoring the National Issues Forums and other deliberative exercises. Most of these efforts are local although many of them are linked in a national network. Deliberative forums held all around the country over the past 40 years have shown that the movement from reaction to judgment can be given a jump start.

Who Else Could Help?

The media frame issues every day. They might consider framings that encourage public deliberations. In fact, some have. They have considered how the public sees an issue and laid out the major options for dealing with it. (Almost always there are more than two options.) And then the journalists have pointed out the difficult trade-offs that have to be considered. Journalists at newspapers, radio, and television stations have also encouraged public deliberations by reporting on forums. The newspapers in the *USA TODAY* network and the public radio stations that make up America Amplified have done this with many of the issues in the 2020 election.⁷

Higher education also has a role to play. Colleges and universities naturally tend to see issues in expert and professional terms. Still, they could add terms people use in making decisions. These terms reflect people's experiences and what they hold dear. (Some centers in academic institutions already do this.) And there are institutions of higher education that have helped students recognize their abilities for collective decision-making and action. These institutions are writing a new chapter in education for citizenship.⁸

Grantmaking foundations have a key role to play in tandem with the media, higher education, and other institutions that are experimenting to find better ways of strengthening democracy. These institutions are breaking new ground, which requires encouragement and support. The most innovative experiments often fail, and it is impossible to know in advance what the results will be. The Wright brothers often crashed in their attempts to develop an airplane. When asked why, an air force general explained, "They didn't know how to fly." That's true for many inventors. Grantmaking foundations have played a critical role in backing risky ventures, and there has seldom been a time when our democracy needed more risk takers than we do now. Last year, the Kettering Foundation and the Council on Foundations issued a report saying that the challenges facing our democracy raised difficult questions for grantmakers.⁹ In the discussions leading up to the report, foundation officers knew they had addressed problems *in* our democracy, but they weren't sure they had taken on the fundamental problems *of* democracy itself, problems that kept democracy from working as it should.

Big Steps: Recognizing Citizens as Producers

Although Americans have to come together to make critical decisions, their biggest obstacle is the pervasive feeling that “people like us” can’t make a difference. And no wonder, citizens are treated more like the objects of the agency of others than agents in their own right. They are readers, viewers, patients, consumers, and clients. They respond, but seldom produce. Elinor Ostrom won the Nobel Prize in 2009 by demonstrating the need for citizens to be agents or producers. She noted that there are things our largest, most expert institutions can’t do without what she called the “coproduction” of public goods by citizens. Recognizing citizens as producers is a big step.

I would add that there are some things *only* citizens working together can provide. For instance, while hospitals can care *for* people, only other people—families, neighbors, friends—can care *about* them. Studies now show that this care is a powerful medicine. And it is needed.

With the People

Ostrom’s argument and Kettering’s own research have led us to suggest adding another preposition to President Lincoln’s plea for a government *of, by, and for* the people. What about more governing *with* the people? We have a new research report coming out that elaborates on that idea. The gist of the idea is in the report’s title: *With*. It is just a different way of thinking about the troubled relationship between citizens and our authoritative institutions. What its practical application could be in foundations, institutions of higher education, the media, and other fields like public administration will take the kind of experimentation noted above. Using a *with-the-people* strategy could also be a way for institutions to keep the loss of public confidence from morphing into what is even more dangerous—a loss of legitimacy.

Treating citizens as producers also speaks to the doubts about people’s ability to make a difference. Producers are powerful; think about what has happened when citizens have joined forces, whether building a playground to provide a safe space for neighborhood children or organizing the Civil Rights Movement, whose antecedents go back decades to what scholars see as its origins—thousands of nameless acts by thousands of nameless people. Over time, these unknown citizens produced a well-known movement that changed the country.

American Inventiveness

The United States is known for the creativity of its citizens. Charles Kettering, for whom our foundation was named, was one of many inventors. Inventors, however, aren't lone individuals. They are products of a culture that values creativity and encourages curiosity. This country has benefited from that culture throughout its history. We can see signs of this culture now in our communities as people, despite distancing, "invent" ways of working together to combat a pandemic, soften the blows to our economy, and try to overcome problems in race relations.

In this piece, I'm not proposing specific changes. There is no model here to copy. Instead, I am making a case for American inventiveness, which has been a prime source of our resilience. People working together as producers and institutions working not just *for* but *with* the people are just ideas. What their applications are has to be discovered. And that will require the experimentation that needs the support of grantmakers (and others) willing to encourage inventiveness.

In today's crises, we can survive anything except the fear that causes us to lose confidence in ourselves and our ability to make a difference. We have prevailed in the past; we can again.

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1. Megan Brennan, "Amid Pandemic, Confidence in Key U.S. Institutions Surges," Gallup, August 12, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/317135/amid-pandemic-confidence-key-institutions-surges.aspx>.
2. Will Friedman and David Schleifer, "Divisiveness and Collaboration in American Public Life: A Hidden Common Ground Report," Public Agenda (2019), <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/divisiveness-and-collaboration-in-american-public-life-a-hidden-common-ground-report/>.
3. Jennifer Bachner and Benjamin Ginsberg report as much in their book *What Washington Gets Wrong: The Unelected Officials Who Actually Run the Government and Their Misconceptions about the American People* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2016), 9.
4. Paul M. Angle, ed., *The Complete Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 128.
5. Philip Geyelin, "Dean Rusk's Pursuit of Peace," Washington Post, February 8, 1984.
6. Michael Lipsky and David J. Olson, *Commission Politics: The Processing of Racial Crisis in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1977). I learned about this study from Jill Lepore, "The History of the 'Riot' Report," *New Yorker*, June 22, 2020.
7. See <https://www.usatoday.com/hiddencommonground/>.
8. The Democracy Fellows program at Wake Forest University is just one example. To read about this effort, see Jill J. McMillan and Katy J. Harriger, *Speaking of Politics: Preparing College Students for Democratic Citizenship through Deliberative Dialogue* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2007).
9. *Our Divided Nation: Is There a Role for Philanthropy in Renewing Democracy?* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2019), 1.